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Bucher Replies Hint Big N. Korean Blunder

Testimony given by Cmdr. Lloyd Bucher before a military court of inquiry yesterday indicates that North Korea may have missed the intelligence coup of the century, a Navy officer said yesterday.

Most of the crewmen were communications technicians, radiomen or had other specialized qualifications for the ship's mission of intelligence gathering.

According to Bucher's testimony, however, the men were not subjected to interrogation that could have disclosed intelligence information or interpretation of the classified documents the Communists had seized.

Bucher and his crewmen were beaten, tortured and threatened

with death, but the North Koreans object was to gain a confession that the crewmen were employees of the Central Intelligence Agency and that the United States was trying to start another war with North Korea, Bucher testified.

The North Koreans then became insistent upon a statement that the Pueblo was inside the 12-mile limit when it was seized, the inquiry was told. When Bucher refused, the Koreans settled for a statement that the Pueblo was 7.6 miles from Korean territory when "boarded."

The Pueblo had been escorted to that point by submarine chasers and patrol boats.

"The Koreans had CIA on the brain," Bucher said.

"They were very insistent upon getting a statement that we were employed by the CIA and that we were sent on a military espionage mission by Rear Adm. Frank Johnson (then commander of naval forces in Japan)," he continued.

Bucher said the Koreans repeatedly asked during interrogations, "why are you spying on us? You are espionage agents who have been caught redhanded."

Bucher said the colonel in charge of the crew was a highly intelligent field officer who had read Shakespeare, and Greek and Roman mythology.

"But he didn't know anything about intelligence," Bucher said. He said the officer kept the crew strictly under army control and "permitted no interference from the Korean Navy or Korean intelligence."

'MANY FRANKS'

Bucher said it was because of the colonel's lack of intelligence training and his "desire to control everything himself" that "we were able to get away with as many pranks as we did in letters and films they released."

Bucher said he was shown classified material from the ship to induce him to confess to spying. After the confession, the crew was moved to a military camp, where there were missile and tank units, and left relatively alone except for an occasional beating to keep them terrorized and in line, he explained.

'CLASSIFIED MATERIAL'

Bucher was asked by the court Wednesday whether he had considered the men in his ship to be "classified material" in that they had knowledge of the ship's mission and its activities. He replied yes.

His testimony indicated the Communists did not try to extract intelligence information from the men other than questions about Navy ships based on information the Koreans had gotten from All Hands (a Navy magazine) or other publications.

"They subscribed to every bit of information they could get," Bucher said. "They wanted to check the information in these publications against the stories they could get from my men. They thought All Hands was a CIA plant."